No. 49. On Conscience.

2d. Corin. 1st Chap. 12th Verse.

Our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience.

Among the many false and discouraging reports brought upon Christianity, this is none of the least, that it is of a sullen disposition and melancholy temper, and leads its professors only to fasting and mourning, to sadness and solitude; as if men, by submitting themselves to its wise institutions and salutary discipline, did renounce all joy and pleasure, and forswear all comfort and enjoyment. On the contrary, Christianity is all mild and courteous——its precepts serve to ennoble our minds and advance our pleasures. It restrains us from nothing but what is unbecoming or pernicious, unworthy of our nature, or destructive of our present as well as future welfare. In all innocent diversions we are left to our own liberty and choice to partake of what delights we please, and by obliging us to use them according to the rules of temperance and sobriety, it gives them the truest

taste and relish. But yet Religion does not think itself bountiful enough in gratifying our appetites with such pleasures, without opening its richer stores and presenting us with spiritual joys, those inward comforts which refresh the soul. It sets us at peace with God and our own conscience, which far exceed all the satisfaction and pleasure that the wicked can take in all their earthly enjoyments;—"God's lift-"ing up the light of his countenance upon us, puts "more gladness into our hearts than when our corn and "wine and oil increase." There is no other foundation of real quiet and undisturbed ease to our minds, but the assurance that God is our friend. It behoves us, therefore, to be on our guard, lest our conscience should deceive us by its testimony.

1st. The word itself, besides the bare notion of know-ledge, implies a relation of that knowledge to some-thing else. It is called Conscience, because a man's actions are known not only to himself but to God, who searcheth and trieth his heart and reins.

"Behold, says Job, my witneſs is in heaven, and "my record on high"—God, who dwelleth in the higheſt heavens, knoweth how juſt I have been towards my neighbour, and how pious alſo towards himſelf. St. Paul, having called upon Chriſt to teſtify the truth of what he was about to say, subjoins, "my conſcience alſo bearing me witneſs;" as if he had said, Chriſt knows I am going to speak what is true, and I alſo know, or am conſcious of it. Let it here be obſerved, that all mankind have this witneſs within them—every man has his own particular conſcience. As for the heathen, tho they have no knowledge of God's revealed laws; yet they have the law of nature for their guide; and St. Paul says expreſsly that "their conſcience bear them wit-"neſs, and their thoughts either accuſe, or elſe ex-"cuſe them." But surely they to whom God has given laws to be obſerved, and to whom God has given reaſon to act and judge according to thoſe laws, cannot but be conſcious to themſelves of having broken or ob-

ſerved them. This is a truth univerſally acknowledged; and yet some men's continued and obſtinate courſe of ſinning ſeems to contradict it, and to ſhew they do not believe they have a conſcience within them bearing witneſs of their actions. They ſin without taking notice of their ſin, and think it like the paſſage of an arrow or bird through the air, "where there is "no token of their way to be found." But let ſuch men retire and commune with their own hearts, examining their paſt lives, by the laws of God, and conſcience will bring thoſe ſins to their remembrance which they fooliſhly thought were forgotten.

2dly. The object about which conſcience is converſant is only a man's moral actions. But by actions are meant here not only what we do, but it takes in alſo our words and thoughts; for both God and our conſcience ſee the one, and hear the other, as well as they know the third. And that we muſt anſwer for them is evident, from our Saviour's forbidding adultery in the heart, and by his telling us that at the

day of judgment we must give an account of every idle word. Also, in regard of us Christians, it witnesses of our true faith in Christ, and our belief of the mysteries of His Religion; for it will accuse us of not believing what we promised at our Baptism to believe, as well as of our transgressing the commandments of God, which we then promised to obey.— And the actions which conscience considers are our own proper deeds, not those of other men. We are to give no account of their lives at the day of judgement, unless they have been influenced by our good or ill example or instruction, or they have perished through our neglect—for this we shall be indeed accountable. Conscience does not observe all the actions of our life, but only such as are morally good or evil, such as in themselves, or by reason of some circumstance that attends them, do concern our duty to God, our neighbour, or ourselves. Conscience applies the knowledge of the law of God to those actions that are either morally good or evil, that we may see whether we have done

well or ill: for our actions are good or bad, according as they agree or disagree with this law; the very rule by which we are to govern ourselves. Now this law or will of God, is either the law of nature or of Revelation. The law of nature as it was granted to all the world, so it is obligatory to all men at all times and in all places. Neither can it be abrogated as long as human nature lasts. This is the law of the heathens to whom God does not vouchsafe the knowledge of His revealed law, and by this they shall be judged at the last day. But we Christians, besides this light, enjoy the benefit of Divine Revelation—Moses and the Prophets, Christ and his Apostles, have declared more clearly the will of God to us. The Scripture is the rule by which we are to be guided, and by which Conscience is to judge of our actions; and when we walk according to this rule, it witnesses on our behalf, and encourages us in well doing.

3dly. Let us now consider the testimony of Conscience.

Conſcience, like God, whoſe vicegerent it is, "is about our path, and about our bed, and ſpieth "out all our ways;" it is our companion from the beginning of our life to the end thereof. Before we engage in any thing, if we conſult with it, it is ready to teſtify and tell us whether the thing be good or evil, and conſequently whether we ought to do it or not. Nay, many times it ſteps in when we either neglect or refuſe to adviſe with it, and witneſſes to our faces that ſuch a thing ought to be done, and that another thing cannot be done without ſinning againſt God, and endangering our ſouls. "Thine ears," ſays the Prophet, "ſhall hear a word behind thee, "ſaying, this is the way, walk ye in it when ye "turn to the right hand and when ye turn to the left." And the ſon of Sirach tells us that a man's mind, that is, his conſcience, is wont to tell him more faithfully than ſeven watchmen, that ſit above in a high tower, can tell what is done round about. And this teſtimony is of great force and efficacy, both

to encourage us in doing well, and to restrain us from doing ill. The pleasure, profit, or deceitfulness of sin, may cast a mist before our eyes, and not suffer conscience to exercise its office. However, it will be a faithful witness of such things as we have done. It takes particular notice of all our actions, and is said to "mark them down in a book," to shew the certainty of its testimony, that it will not forget any thing. When Judas had got his reward, for betraying his master, his conscience soon found out his sin, and made him confess that he had sinned, "in that "he had betrayed the innocent blood." It is a witness which can be no way avoided. The darkness of the night, the secrecy of the place, the disguise of hypocrisy, may perhaps conceal our intents and actions from the eyes of men, but no darkness, no secrecy, no length of time, no color or pretence whatever can bind the eyes of this our inward witness, which we can neither expel nor evade. Even death itself cannot give us a release from it; for it will be

found in us at the last day, either condemning or absolving us.

4thly. Let us consider, in the last place, the joy that arises from the testimony of a good conscience. This joy consists in a chearful reflection upon the integrity of our conduct; when we not only dare do so, but look back with pleasure on what we have done, and know that we have the testimony of Heaven on our side, bearing witness to the dictates of our own heart. And indeed what can possibly administer greater satisfaction to a rational and moral agent, than the assurance of his being restored to the grace and favor of God—that there is a league of friendship between God and himself—that his transgressions are washed away by the precious blood of his Redeemer—and that God will bestow upon him a kingdom of glory? Now the ground of a Christian's joy is not the testimony which his conscience gives to this or that good action, but to the general tenor and course of his life, "that in sim-
"plicity, and godly sincerity, he has had his conversa-

" tion in the world." In God's favour is life, and His loving-kindneſs " is better than the life itſelf." And this joy has advantages peculiar and ineſtimable. In worldly pleaſures, we frequently complain of having too much, as well as we do of having too little, of them—the appetite is ſoon ſatiated, and that which was at firſt our pleaſure, afterwards diſguſts us. But the excellency of this joy is, that it never ſatiates. Let it be conſidered too, that this joy is in a matter of the greateſt concern. The benefits which Chriſt purchaſed for us by his death are ineſtimable, they cannot be expreſsed; but then, unleſs we perform thoſe conditions God requires, we cannot apply them to ourſelves. So that it is the teſtimony of a godly life, and of a converſation becoming the Goſpel of Chriſt, which can alone entitle us to them. He that is the happieſt man, on account of worldly enjoyments, is not able to ſecure his own happineſs, becauſe he may not be able to defend it from malice and violence. But nothing can break entirely the caſe of a good man—

no evidence can force the guards of his conscience, nor thoroughly disturb the composure of his mind—— his conscience will afford him support, when he shall stand most in need of it—— "in all time of his tribu= "lation, in the hour of death, and in the day of "judgment."

That we may posess this testimony of conscience, this "peace of God, which passeth all understanding," we beseech Thee, Almighty God, "who alone canst "order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men, "to cleanse our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy "Spirit," that in all our words and actions we may be able to appeal to Thee, "our witness in heaven." Remembering that Thou hast implanted thy Vice= gerent within us, before we undertake what may affect others or ourselves, let us fairly consult its dictates, and attentively listen to its admonitions. When our conscience, to encourage us to acts of piety, or deter us from works of sin, suggests a promise or presents a threaten= ing contained in thy holy Word, let us "bind it about our

" neck, let us write it upon the table of our heart."
Whilst we continue in this vale of tears, let the foun=
dation of our happiness be laid, and the prospect of
our hopes enlivened, by its applauding testimony.
And when we stand most in need of support, when
we are about " to walk through the valley of the sha=
" dow of death," grant that we may derive consolation
from our own hearts; let us not have to encounter in
those awful moments with the complaints of the in=
jured, with the cries of the fatherless, and the lamen=
tations of the widow; but may our conscience pro=
claim our innocence, and assure us that our sins are
washed away through the precious blood of Christ!

Entered at Stationers' Hall.

Theoph^{s}. J. St. John.

Sickness. James 5. 14.—(40) Afflictions. Psalm 85. 8.—(41) Entrance to Cure. 2 Cor. 4. 5.—(42) Day of Judgment. Acts 17. 31.—(43) Censure. Mat. 7. 1.—(44) Charity. 1 John 3. 17.—(45) On the Gospel Precepts. Mat. 7. 21.—(46) Dives and Lazarus. Luke 16. 22.—(47) Man's fall and restoration. 2 Cor. 5. 14, 15.—(48) Good Samaritan. Luke 10. 36, 37.—(49) Conscience. 2 Cor. 1. 12.—(50) Nature of New-Birth. John 3. 3. (51) Abraham offering Isaac. Gen. 22. 2.—(52) Loss of Soul. Mat. 16. 26.

Extract of a Letter from a Dignitary to his Nephew.

On my return to ——— I found my Congregation and Communicants prodigiously increased, my Curate had used Mr. St. John's MSS. Sermons, with which my Parishioners are much pleased, and, I hope, improved. They are wrote upon the Plan recommended by Dr. Blair in his Lectures; the conclusions are in general so very pathetic and persuasive, that they scarce can fail of producing a good effect.